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THE MODERN NOTE IN SENECA'S *LETTERS*¹

BY RICHARD M. GUMMERE

The literary world is prone to eye askance one who mingles types, or, to borrow a phrase from Latin comedy, practices "contaminatio." In the drama, lyric, no matter how inspiring, must be subordinate to the action; for this reason the public has not bestowed immortality upon George Darley, the "belated Elizabethan." Nor will the lyric itself permit much moralizing; for this reason many of Wordsworth's poems met with a storm of disapproval. If the epic ceases to tell a story and dwells too much upon description, the reader is wearied; for this reason the narrative poetry of Southey and Landor is no longer read except by the specialist or the curio-hunter. Seneca was similarly handicapped; his prose could not be identified with the direct study of oratory, as could that of his father; nor with the drama of history, as Tacitus; nor with the professional side of Stoicism, as Epictetus; nor with the descriptive charms of an epistolographer like Pliny. In the *Epistulae morales*, he has tried to write a personal letter, to move his correspondent with the beauty of philosophy and virtue, to deal directly with the throbbing facts of his own epoch, and to suggest remedies for its shortcomings. Hence he is judged at every point of approach. And it is only by virtue of his message to the world of today, to his modern element, that we can insist on his enduring value. I hope to show, perhaps by a sort of paradox, that this very mixing of literary types, this habit of scorning the "liturgical" form, has resulted in the catholicity of his appeal to so many thinkers in subsequent ages.

It is well known that his successors under the empire subjected him to much criticism. He was a puzzle to his own contemporaries. Just as some gifted Hibernian, who settles in the literary world of London and conceals a genuine message beneath the mask of paradox and pose, is greeted with cheers of approval and hisses of scorn,

¹ The writer of this paper is under obligations to Messrs. Hense, Waltz, Summers, and E. V. Arnold for their recent works on the text, the life, the selected Letters, and Seneca's place in Roman philosophy, respectively.

even so this brilliant son of a Spaniard grew to power and evoked tributes of admiration no less than doubts regarding his right to wield that power. Tacitus sketches him as a subtly persuasive speaker, an able bureaucrat with a dash of conscience, a safe guide for erring princes, and a foiled and disappointed hero, nothing in whose life became him like the leaving it. Dio Cassius sneers at his elaborate collections of curios; Juvenal and others allude to him as proverbially rich; his own letter from exile to the freedman Polybius disgusts us with its cringing despair; and Suetonius, though expressly declaring that "the charge was vague and the accused was given no opportunity to defend himself," hints at scandal and connects his name with a princess of the royal house. We learn also that he shut his eyes to the murder of Agrippina, that he condoned Nero's personal vices, that he managed the finances of the empire soundly and shrewdly, that he worked in harmony with Burrus, that he was the object of many attacks from the opposition benches in the Senate, and that about the year 62, when Nero's adolescent rascality had blossomed into repulsive crime, he sought to be rid of the burdens of state. Furthermore, what can we say in answer to the diatribes of Quintilian, Gellius, and Fronto, except to remark that he was a greater literary personality than any of these three critics? They flay him alive for his un-Ciceronian sentences, his abrupt personalities, his jingling juxtapositions. It is not until we get into an atmosphere of detachment that we find favorable comments.

The church elevated Seneca into a pseudo-saint. The Renaissance promoted him to the first literary rank. Montaigne relied upon him as one of two authors who supplied him with "timber" for his essays. Thomas Lodge says that "his divine sentences, wholesome counsels, serious exclamations against vices, in being but a heathen, may make us ashamed being Christians." Rousseau, who is essentially Senecan in his attack and in his manner of thought, broke new ground in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. The essay (1750) embodies the fundamental principles of Rousseau's message. The writer bases his argument against the refinements of knowledge by recalling the glory of poverty and the power of the tiller of the soil. Virtue strips off trappings and reveals the soul. Cato is praised *con amore*; so is Socrates. A sort of socialism is

outlined where there exists no distinction of talents. The country brook teaches more than the city street. Virtue is the only philosophy.

Thus, if one reads between the lines, one understands that whenever a new movement of a certain type was in progress and matter from ancient literature had to be found as groundwork of the new theory, Seneca is frequently called upon to furnish the material. The early church, Petrarch, Montaigne, Thomas à Kempis, Lodge, and Rousseau are, in various ways, fingerposts along the road of European progress. Whenever ideas are the criterion, Seneca makes headway; whenever scientific facts predominate, Seneca loses ground.

Montesquieu, that safe and sane thinker, strikes the keynote of revolt; in his *Lettres persanes*¹ he says: "The Orientals are wise enough to seek remedies against depression of spirit as carefully as against disease. When a European meets with calamity, his only resource is to read a philosopher called *Seneca*; but the Asiatics . . . use beverages which can make a man merry and render pleasant the memories of former suffering." Science now renounces ultra-idealism; Adam Smith, and the predecessors of Darwin, and the makers of new republics, and the framers of corn laws and anti-corn laws are occupied with more practical matters. Curiously enough, the Romantic Movement in poetry did not counteract scientific progress, but went hand in hand therewith; as science loosened its fetters, so did the Muse. Sainte-Beuve, Emerson, and Matthew Arnold (the names are significant) are among the few who welcome Seneca's message. The forward drive of the Victorian era made a détour about the gardens of the first Christian pagan. What the twentieth century will do, no one knows; it may be preparing another Rousseau, another Seneca. M. Maeterlinck is alternately worshiped and reproached, as was Seneca; and it is significant to note a fugitive paper which came from his hands a few years ago, of which the subject is Death, and in which is much material resembling Seneca, and treated according to the Senecan method.²

¹ Usbek à Rhedi, 33d letter, on coffee.

² See *Everybody's Magazine*, XXV (1911), 36-47; *Hibbert Journal*, IX (1911), 765-68. M. Maeterlinck's article contains a direct reference to Seneca's motto: "Don't delay the end of a torture which (as good Seneca says) is the best part of that torture!"

Let us turn, then, to the *Letters* themselves, so that we may determine by internal evidence what were these elements of revolt or of progress which irritated Seneca's contemporaries and stirred later generations either to censure or to praise. The *Epistulae morales*, in spite of the real personality of the recipient Lucilius, were written for the relief of a mind embittered, for the eradication of a rooted sorrow. They follow one another in quick succession, ostensibly as answers to questions put by the young procurator of Sicily, whom the author is endeavoring to win over to Stoicism. The "prime minister in spite of himself" was forgetting politics and recalling the spiritual thoughts of his earlier years. But the book is the work of a practical man. Though much of the matter derives from Zeno and Cleanthes and Chrysippus, these two Romans are persons whom we should now associate with long-distance telephones and office desks and diplomatic missions. They are like John Hay and Lord Haldane, far removed from the world-citizen of the Alexandrian period of Greece, with his doctrines about philosophers in business and his practice of aloofness from affairs. Rome had done what Greece could not do; she had put the study of wisdom into harness, as an integral inspiration of something essential to business and life, rather than a shadowy subject for the lecture-room. Seneca constructs a handbook of helpful hints to the learner, and shows a half-revealed self, almost playing the autobiographer. He paves the way for St. Augustine. Financially and politically, the man was to be reckoned with; spiritually, no one understood him. Small wonder that the church seized upon precepts which presented the outward form of a Pauline epistle, the broad essentials of the belief to be inculcated, and the charm of a half-hidden personality!

The writer makes no pretense at originality, scholarship, or objective accuracy. He is independent: "Here is a motto for today, which I found in Epicurus; for, you know, I am accustomed to cross over into the enemy's camp, not as a deserter, but as a scout."¹ "That which senators do, I think philosophers should do also; when someone makes a motion of which I approve in part, I ask him to make two instead, and I vote for that which pleases me."² "In

¹ *Ep.* 2. 5.

² *Ep.* 21. 9.

my opinion, Epicurus was a brave man, even though he did wear long sleeves."¹ Seneca uses the word *voluptas* in its popular sense and refuses to test the word according to the Stoic meaning.² Ancient tradition counts for much, but not for everything: "Cures for the soul have been discovered by those of old time; but it is our duty to determine their application. Our predecessors have accomplished much, but they have not finished the task."³ Again, he that would get wisdom must go to school all his days: "Are you surprised that at my time of life I am taking down lectures on philosophy? . . . If an old man attends the theater and visits the circus and allows no gladiators to fight it out in his absence, why should he blush to attend a philosopher's lecture? You ought to study as long as you are ignorant, in other words, as long as you live."⁴ In the realm of dialectic he throws aside the syllogisms of his Greek predecessors: "I adhere to my testimony, that this sort of proof does not please me. It is shameful for a man to go forth to battle on behalf of gods and men, if he arms himself only with an awl."⁵ Lastly, "Don't you think that a man who busies himself with the useless paraphernalia of literature ought to be rebuked? To know more than one needs is a sort of debauchery."⁶

The value of informality, of the quick personal touch, is maintained: "You are right in asking me to correspond more frequently. Conversation helps most, because it creeps bit by bit into the soul. There is too much noise and too little intimacy in harangues which are prepared beforehand and spouted in the presence of an audience."⁷ "Why do you complain that my letters are rather careless? Now who can speak carefully without trying to speak mincingly? My letters must be like our conversations face to face, during a visit or a walk, free and easy."⁸

The form and method of the *Letters* are essay, autobiography, constructive propaganda. In the opening letter we find purely business terminology, suited to a trafficking South Italian. There is much

¹ *Ep.* 33. 2.

² *Ep.* 59. 1: *magnum ex ep. tua percepi voluptatem, etc.*

³ *Ep.* 64. 8 f.

⁶ *Ep.* 88. 36.

⁴ *Ep.* 76. 2 f.

⁷ *Ep.* 38. 1.

⁵ *Ep.* 85. 1.

⁸ *Ep.* 75. 1.

talk about saving time; Seneca speaks like a prosperous business man addressing a young clerk whose ambition beckons him on to partnership. Taken piecemeal, the letters are detached and jerky; viewed in the large, they are cumulative and encyclopedic. Most critics have failed to see this fact. There is also another delightful ruse; the author appends to the earlier epistles a sort of text which contains some wholesome motto entitled, in banker phraseology, "my little dash of profit," "my contribution for today," "my last instalment," and other phrases which make the young civil servant at home. This custom is abandoned as unnecessary when the writer reaches the thirty-third letter. There are homely little touches, such as the liberty-capped brawlers of the Saturnalia, and a description of a pilgrimage to the manor-house of the author's boyhood, where he notes the gnarled tree-trunks and moralizes on the fact that he had planted those trees himself. By the forty-sixth letter, the neophyte has written a book: "I was not merely pleased; I was filled with joy. The sun tempted me, hunger warned me, the clouds began to threaten, but I swallowed the book whole." From now on we have presented to Lucilius the Stoic masters, some second-hand Plato and Aristotle, and a comfortable assumption that conversion is accomplished. So much for the method of approach.

The literary criterion is also different from that of other Latin letter-writers or essayists. Unlike Cicero, the author of a brilliant diary; unlike Pliny, who puts together a charming little essay in the manner of Charles Lamb, Seneca proceeds toward his point in a discursive, disjointed, and epigrammatic style. Like Bacon, he has "taken all knowledge to be his province"; this irritates Quintilian the rhetorician, Gellius the antiquary, Fronto the archaizer. But most of the sources are accurate, if second-hand and occasionally out of place. In spite of "jog-trot bumping phrases" (Fronto), Seneca's meaning, although the despair of the translator, is always clear. The chief cause of his poor impression on these writers is his habit of relating everything to morals, instead of taking the artistic viewpoint. His pet aversion is mountebank oratory. Maecenas is the aristocratic representative of this tendency: "We know well enough how Maecenas lived, how he used to loll along the streets,

what a dandy he was, how he loved to show off, how anxious he was to display his vices. . . . And is not his style just as loose as his very dress? But he might have risen to lofty heights, had he guided his talents in a narrower path, had he been willing to make himself clear, had he not been slipshod even in his style."¹ In a lower class he singles out the philosopher Serapio,² who pours forth his eloquence like a torrent, grinding and pounding his words so that it seemed as if a human voice could not bear the strain, nor a human ear, either. The great man, says Seneca, speaks freely and comfortably; his words are convincing rather than carefully constructed. Reason, he feels—a 'deity who should be enshrined in her temple—is degraded if she be clothed in fashionable oratory and subjected to the mauling of dilettanti who dress elegantly, mount the platform with mincing step, and scratch their curly heads with their little fingers. This view is not inconsistent; it simply reveals the fact that the diatribe of this period, the medium of most prose, save history, in the early Roman empire, welcomes a striving for "point," and that anyone who discourses against its excesses naturally falls into a style resembling the diatribe itself. If the moral impulse had not stirred Seneca, he would now be rusting in the oblivion which has overtaken all the word-mongers of the age of Tiberius and Caligula and Nero. As Byron's keen satire revived the worn-out heroic couplet, so Seneca took his literary framework from contemporary decadent orators and infused it with vitality.

His views on politics and public life are essentially modern. I cannot find much positive evidence that the later Greek philosophers who lectured to admiring crowds and occasionally made visits of a preceptorial nature to the courts of various rulers were especially practical in the results which they accomplished. They gave a tone to the *Zeit-Geist*; but there is scanty evidence that they created philosopher-kings. Those Roman statesmen who begin with the Scipios were far more of this type than the tyrants of the post-Alexandrian era. In the empire period which Seneca represents, the very life of the state depended on a combination of idealism and business. Preserve it by any means from the caprice of a degenerate Dauphin! Thus philosophy did what nothing else could have done;

¹ *Ep.* 114. 4.

² *Ep.* 40. 2.

and any supposed inconsistencies of preaching and practice show merely that the current was too strong for a philosopher without a soldier's help; the death of Burrus weakens the prime minister. At one time Seneca calls philosophy an essential guide to statecraft; at another, the whole pursuit of politics is defined as vain, and the sage is recommended to retreat within himself and leave the madding crowd. Middle ground is taken in the seventy-third letter, where philosophers are mentioned as owing a debt to rulers who attach them to the state, but leave them liberty to work out their theories and plan measures which will help the very state of which they have been made independent. Seneca's occasional cries of despair are the cries of one who is overwhelmed by the gloom of Nero's decadence, by approaching old age, and by the powers of Poppaea Sabina. Trajan, that most practical of rulers, regarded the *quinquennium Neronis* as the ideal period of Roman political efficiency.

Although the Greeks frequently felt scruples as to the advisability of slavery,¹ we know that reform never came and that "big business" and the slave trade at Delos were too strong for the sentimentalists. Roman law treated the slave as a *res*, and the early Romans gave the law every benefit when in doubt. After Augustus came a reign of terror, manifesting itself in family rather than in national rebellions. Textbooks on Roman law² show us that by the time of Vespasian many acts had been passed for the protection of the slave; also, that the Antonines improved matters still more. And by the time of Justinian the slave question was no longer an issue. Two letters of Seneca (47 and 70) represent the philosopher as reacting against current custom: "I am glad to hear, Lucilius, that you live on friendly terms with your slaves; . . . they are our friends, nay, rather, our fellow-slaves, because Fortune has power over us no less than over *them*. . . . Let them speak freely in your presence, so that they may not gossip behind your back. . . . Do not subject them to humiliating tasks. Let them *dine in company with you*;³ . . . Assume that your coachman is a gentleman, and you will make him

¹ Gilbert Murray, *Rise of the Greek Epic*, pp. 16 ff., gives a clear summary of the Hellenic view.

² See R. W. Leage, *Roman Private Law*, pp. 46 ff.

³ It is a far cry to the old Roman householder who gathered his *familia* under one roof.

one!" Seneca's practice evidently conformed to his precept, since he allows (83. 4) his pace-maker to chaff him on his "second childhood." And among the many heroes who meet death voluntarily, in addition to the Catos and admirals and generals, there is a poor Doric slave-boy who dashes his head against a wall, and a German gladiator who discovers a grewsome method of exit from the sordid barracks where he was incarcerated. These bits of protest are not limited to Seneca; but we may sum up his revolt on the serf question by contrasting him with such genial writers as the Younger Pliny, who treat their slaves like spoiled children, and go comfortably about their business. Even Epictetus reflects this tendency. Seneca is the most outspoken of all.¹

Another outspoken word is that which deals with the gladiator-athlete. Cicero is intellectually bored with the games, and so is Pliny; but Seneca roundly denounces the "bleacherite." "Those who are beefy in body are beefy in brains." "There is nothing worse than large quantities of wine poured into a stomach fatigued from heavy exercise."² Instead of boxing and wrestling, he says, try jumping, cross-country running, and dumb-bell exercises. "An educated man is a fool to be always thinking of enlarging his biceps; . . . try as you will, you can never grow to be as strong as a first-class bull." "If a man's body can be toughened in the choking dust and under the blinding sun, why cannot the mind also be trained by plain living and high thinking?"³ This devotion to brainless brawn is fitted, he declares, neither to the scholar nor to the gentleman; how wise was that gladiator who, on the way to the morning exhibition, inserted his head between the chariot-spokes, and won his release! Avoid crowds! They defile you. "The other day, I went to see a show; it was pure manslaughter instead of the rest and relaxation which I expected. 'Kill him, lash him, brand him!' cried the mob; . . . 'Why doesn't he die game?' . . . Do you not suppose that evil sights like these return to plague him who beholds them?"⁴ *Panem et circenses!*

¹ See Arnold, *Roman Stoicism*, pp. 374 ff., 397 ff.

² *Ep.* 15.

³ *Ep.* 80.

⁴ *Ep.* 7.

Feminism, that most modern of all modern topics, offers the most fruitful field for Seneca's reform ideas.¹ As the Eternal City became more cosmopolitan, woman took a prominent part as *dominatrix* of the salon, as did her successor in eighteenth-century France. The result of it all in high life was a sort of cynical compromise in her relations with man; Seneca, although he had burned his fingers in court intrigue, seems to have been happy in his two marriages. And in his writings he takes higher ground than one would expect in high life during such an epoch. His death and the circumstances of his death speak volumes; so does the 104th letter:

"I went into the country for a change of air, despite the reluctance of my dear Paulina; I quoted my brother Gallio's words—that disease is a matter of place and not of constitution—for Paulina is always recommending me to guard my health. Since I know that our souls are united, I take care of her by taking care of myself. . . . A man who does not hold his wife . . . in high enough esteem to remain a little longer in this world for her sake, is an effeminate laggard." "What is sweeter than to be so loved by one's wife that one is dearer to one's own self for this very reason?"

In the abstract, we find several statements of a new viewpoint. For example, "How unreasonable it is for a man to insist on conjugal fidelity in his wife, and at the same time to be in love with the wives of other men!"² Seneca far outdistances other Roman writers in his championing of women; Marcus Aurelius, with sad eyes, says little, for he was Faustina's husband. Epictetus regards a wife and children as so much baggage which must be faithfully checked. Cicero regards women, including the cross-grained and rheumatic Terentia, as necessary evils, excepting, of course, his daughter Tullia. Even Pliny, with his charming description of a Roman girl, with his shrewd understanding of middle-aged ladies, including his mother-in-law, and his kindness in securing husbands for young girls whose provinciality has perhaps scared off suitors, takes us into a world which resembles "Cranford," where no one does anything unusual. But Seneca burns with modern ideas. Scribonia jests at the foot of the guillotine,³ when called into council by a scapegrace nephew:

¹ See Mrs. George Haven Putnam, *The Lady*; Ferrero, *Women of the Caesars*; and Friedlaender, *passim*.

² *Ep.* 94. 26.

³ *Ep.* 70. 10.

"Why trouble yourself," says the excellent lady, "with doing what others will do for you?" Seneca also mentions the famous case of Sattia, a sort of female Old Parr in Roman legend; Sattia was a noblewoman who lived in the reign of Claudius and whose physician left orders to carve on his tomb the fact that he had doctored the withered dame almost to the bourne of a hundred years.¹ "You see that some persons actually boast about their age. Now who could have endured the old lady's remarks, had she lived to complete her century of existence?"

These are cases from the aristocracy. But the wide sympathy of Seneca is proved by the sympathetic account of the slave-woman Harpasté.² "You are aware, of course, my dear Lucilius, that Harpasté, my wife's female clown, has been retained in my household as a burden from a legacy. Personally, I hate all these freaks; whenever I wish to enjoy the quips of a fool, I have not far to seek; I can laugh at myself. Be that as it may, my fool suddenly lost her eyesight. The story sounds incredible, but it is true; she doesn't know that she is blind. She keeps asking her attendant to change her quarters, says that the house is too dark. Now what amuses us in the case of Harpasté clearly happens to all the rest of us; . . . the blind seek a guide, but we wander guideless and make excuses."

There is on the one side a serious appeal for the rights of woman, and on the other a half-humorous understanding of feminine fancy.³ Perhaps the facts can be explained by some wondrous mother-influence (and there is evidence in Seneca's other works to support this theory), such as we find in the *Muetterchen* of Goethe.

Roman writers have treated (and treated more exhaustively) many of the topics with which this paper deals. But they have treated them separately, and not as parts of a constructive doctrine which aims to enlighten a beginner in the field of thinking. For this reason Seneca offers the most complete handbook on living, and anticipates the ideas of a later world in many particulars. We have not spoken of his contributions to science; nor have we discussed his

¹ *Ep.* 77. 20.

² *Ep.* 50. 2 f.

³ See also the consolatory essays to Marcia and Helvia, and the fragment *De matrimonio*.

love of Nature,¹ since the interpretation of Nature is such a subjective matter, open to the personal interpretation of the investigator. The puzzle of Seneca's personality, of his half-revealed *ego*, may be accounted for by the progressive ideas in correspondence, literary criticism, feminism, slavery, and anti-athleticism, which we have indicated above. At any rate, when bulked together and presented in his peculiar manner, they perplexed his contemporaries. Perhaps they hark back to the "dark Iberians," among whom the philosopher was born.

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¹ See, for example, the picnic party, in the 87th letter.